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The Vermont Eugenics Movement

Background

Eugenics was first developed in Europe in the mid-19th century as a concept that applied plant and animal breeding philosophies to humans. In the United States, this was furthered by Victorian ideals of ethnic superiority and inferiority that ended up yielding a type of "new racism" (Wiseman 2001, p. 145). These developments were fueled by new emigration patterns from Eastern and Southern Europe. Society underwent a shift, embracing Xenophobia (fear of foreigners) and rejecting the increased racial and ethnic diversity that had developed, especially in southern New England.

Perkins' Research

Dr. Henry Perkins, a Professor of Zoology at the University of Vermont picked up the eugenics movement in Vermont in the mid 1920s. In February of 1923, students under Perkins started looking more into human heredity and genetics. Dr. Charles Davenport first pointed Perkins in the direction of the eugenics movement, claiming that Vermont was the perfect arena for the eugenics survey. In a letter to Perkins, Davenport wrote "... in the study of defects found in drafted men Vermont stood at or near the top of the list as having precisely or nearly the highest defect rate for quite a series of defects..." (Davenport, 2/23/1923).

From 1925-1928 Perkins "conducted extensive investigations on selected kinship groups in Vermont to develop 'pedigrees of degeneracy' among Vermont's rural poor" (Gallagher, 2002). Perkins released five reports during his studies of eugenics and Vermonters. Here, the term "survey" refers to a concentrated campaign of isolation, stereotyping, segregation, and sterilization (Dann 1991, Gallagher 1999). Contemporary scholars who have studied Perkins' work, Nancy Gallagher and Kevin Dann, have used the terms "negative" and "positive" eugenics to categorize the methods used. Negative eugenics refers to sexual sterilization and institution of people with traits that were considered "undesirable." Positive eugenics refers to the campaign to increase the population of people who had "desirable" traits. The first two surveys concentrated on the negative eugenics measures, namely sexual sterilization and expansion of institutions for the "feebleminded, imbeciles, and idiots" (Dann 1991, Gallagher 1999).

Within the first report, Perkins had categorized his subjects into three groups: the "Pirates" who were people who lived along the lake; the "Chorea Families" who were people with mental disorders; and the "Gypsy Families" who were people with "dark skin due to an admixture of negro and Indian blood" (Perkins, 1927). There were approximately 430 families assigned to the category of Gypsy. After his second report, he expanded to a comprehensive survey of all factors affecting rural life. In 1931, when he released his final report, Perkins

focused on a working plan for "rural rejuvenation and development and an important study documenting the perceived relationship between social, cultural, and economic forces in rural Vermont during the inter-war years" (Gallagher, 2002).

State Complicity

After three legislative introductions over the course of nineteen years, Vermont became the twenty-fifth state to enact a sterilization law in 1931. It was first proposed by outgoing Governor John A. Mead and introduced by Senator Elmer Johnston of Franklin County in 1912. Based on the recommendation of the Committee of Public Health the bill passed in both the House and Senate but was vetoed by Governor Allen Fletcher. The Senate overrode the veto but the House did not. In 1927 the law was again proposed, at which time it passed in the Senate but not in the House. It was finally passed in both chambers in 1931 and was signed by Governor Stanley Wilson on April 1 (Dann, 1991, 23-24).

While legislation supporting the eugenics movement was not enacted until 1931, many prominent state officials were involved prior to that year. UVM's president, Guy Bailey, was a continual supporter of Perkins and the eugenics movement, helping him to secure funding from the wealthy Rockefeller family and other private sources. He also provided sabbatical time for him to organize the Eugenics Survey. Other state officials that served on the Advisory Committee of the Eugenics Survey included: Dr. C. F. Dalton, Secretary, State Board of Health; R. H. Walker, Superintendent, State Prison; Dr. E. A. Stanley, Superintendent, State Hospital for the Insane; Clarence Dempsey, Commissioner of State Education; and William H. Dyer, Commissioner of Public Welfare (Dann, 1991, 23).

Conclusion and Effects on the Abenaki

According to State Archivist Gregory Sanford, "gypsies" was a code word for people of Abenaki descent. Sanford and Gallagher have estimated from the survey records that around 300 Abenaki people were sterilized (Sanford 1/30/02). It is important to note that variations in terminology and documentation of the procedures make it impossible to obtain an exact number, so an estimate is the best one can do.

Gallagher emphasizes that cultural and familial impacts of eugenics were longer lasting and more visible (Gallagher, 1999). Children were taught to speak English only and shed traditional Abenaki clothing. Many of the Abenaki youth grew up without knowing their heritage and history (Gallagher p 120-179). Other psychological and cultural effects are frequently discussed in Abenaki literature and folklore. In an article for the *Boston Globe*, Ellen Barry reports on the effects of the Eugenics Survey that are still felt by the Abenaki community today. April Rushlow (chief of the Abenaki Nation) stated that "she feared that as a result some senior citizens would refuse to participate in the U.S. Census in 2000, even though that information is kept confidential." In the same article, Rushlow's father, the late Chief Homer St. Francis, reports that many members of the community hid their language, religion, customs, and many personal characteristics to escape persecution. While this kept some from being sterilized, it essentially wiped out their culture.

Sources

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